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ABSTRACT

Focusing on three points, this paper looks at social science textbooks in France. First, in France there is no such thing as integrated instruction of history and the social sciences. Second, in France there are no "official" textbooks: they are prepared and published by the private sector. Third, since new textbooks are the result of private sector institutions, there is no institute for assessing textbooks by categorizing them. Trends in the development of social sciences textbooks in France are summarized. For example, with economics and social science textbooks there is a trend toward more elaborate contents, while with history and geography books there is a gradual move away from written text in favor of illustration. (DB)

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COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Workshop for pedagogical research into history and social sciences - methodologies for analysing school textbooks

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SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS: BOOKS LIKE ANY OTHER?

by

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In order to explain the background of this study, three important points firstly need to be made about the French education system:

1. In France, there is no such thing as integrated instruction of History and Social Sciences. In "collèges" (where the final year is the last in compulsory schooling) and "lycées", History, Geography and Civic Instruction are taught as a joint subject. In primary education, History, Geography and social environment classes are taught on an elementary basis, as part of what are sometimes collectively called "awareness disciplines".

Social Sciences have been taught in combination with Economics and Political Sciences for just over twenty years, but only at upper-secondary level (lycée). In their fifth-year classes (known as "détermination") all pupils are given compulsory instruction in the rudiments of Economics and Social Sciences. Pupils having opted for this discipline as their main sixth-form subject then go on to attend a special section ("filière"): Première B and Terminale B. The characteristic element is four to five hours of classes in Economics and Social Sciences per week. Pupils in other sections may attend such classes if they wish and provided their school can offer them. Pupils in a technological or industrial section forgo both the introductory and the subsequent instruction in this subject.

Of course, these two subject groups are not mutually exclusive. Teachers of History or Geography may have to handle notions of sociology and economics, especially when teaching collège pupils or those in sections other than B. Nor can Economics and Social Science teachers neglect the historical or geographical dimension of the problems they deal with. Their recruitment examination includes a test in Economics, History or Geography which is compulsory for the Agrégation, optional for the CAPES (School teacher diplomas).

Finally, co-operation very frequently exists in schools between teachers of both subject groups. It may even extend to allocating to one or other member of staff certain chapters or sections of their respective syllabuses so as to avoid repetition.

To sum up, different problems require a different approach. One example is the problem examined by our Norwegian colleague in his study of under-development. Account must be taken of the pupils' age (collège or lycée) as well as the degree of specialisation by pupils and teachers. History or Geography textbooks in France could well be criticised for much the same reason as their Norwegian counterparts. Economics or Social Sciences textbooks largely escape this criticism, partly because they are more specialised, but also because more time is spent on this problem when actually teaching the discipline, so that the analysis tends to be more detailed.

2. In France, "official" textbooks do not exist nor are any recommended by the Education Minister. They are prepared and published by the private sector without outside interference and in accordance with the rules of free enterprise. Teachers would definitely resent what they would see as an obligation to teach any kind of "official doctrine", especially when it comes to human sciences. Even in the collèges, where textbooks are provided by the state free of charge, the authorities have no powers in this respect beyond merely setting a budget per pupil, which amounts to a technical guideline for publishers.

In their search for new ideas for textbooks, publishers turn to reliable series editors and authors, who tend to be teachers (sometimes in higher education). But some are members of the national or Regional Teaching Inspectorate which can lead to a rather ambiguous situation as the Inspectorate also sets the syllabus, forms part of the administrative hierarchy and dispenses pedagogical advice to teachers.

Authors and editors bear legal as well as scientific and academic responsibility. The National Education Ministry can in no way be held responsible for textbook contents.

The textbook has an important role to play in teaching; as one of my colleagues puts it: "Textbooks give rise to far more syllabus reforms than official decrees do". As a result publishers and authors try to follow the official syllabus as closely as possible. They also endeavour to reflect the spirit made explicit by official instructions on teaching methods. Until now, both syllabus and instructions have been set by the General Inspectorate, but this is due to change, as the Education Minister has set up a Syllabus Council comprising teachers, educational methodology specialists and scientists. The Council's job is to submit new draft syllabuses, in connection with the lycée reforms currently being studied.

Therefore, teachers' advice by speciality will dictate which textbooks will be used in each school, for a period of at least four years. There is a risk that if a particular teacher considers the textbook to be unsuitable, it will be underused and pupils will be deprived of an indispensable learning tool.

3. Since new textbooks are the result of private sector initiatives, there is no institute for assessing textbooks by categorising them. There is, in fact, a National Institute for Educational Research and a National Centre for Educational Documentation, both of which have sub-offices in the Regions and Departments, but they perform different role. When carrying out given research, they may analyse textbooks in full or in part, but they never explicitely guide teachers' choice.

How, then, are school textbooks assessed?

Procedures vary although they are all based on trial and error.

- All teachers, during their own teaching career, make choices in the light of personal experience and try to have certain textbooks ordered for use in their school. A teacher also has to decide which role to give to the textbook, whether it is a partner or a back-up.

- When student teachers are being trained or are on teaching placements, inspectors and counselling staff help them to choose textbooks wisely and use them properly. Certain groups even work out an assessment scale. Another approach is to carry out a methodical analysis of how a certain element is dealt with by different textbooks. Advice is normally given by word of mouth but, even if printed, it tends to reach only a restricted audience, rarely extending beyond regional level.

To conclude, there follows a tentative analysis of the development of textbooks.

In Economics and Social Sciences textbooks there is a marked trend towards more elaborate contents, not as a result of syllabus reforms, which have been few and superficial (except in the fifth year of secondary education), but as a reflection of gradual economic and social changes over the last twenty years. Authors not only refrain from dropping a single chapter or section from the first textbooks used in 1970s, but they actually add to them and, as time goes by, include further articles on currency, international trade, the growth of newly-industrialised countries, developments in the Third World and socialist countries, etc. The result is often a cumbersome and costly textbook.

Before long it will undoubtedly be necessary to highlight, with the help of different typographies, the required minimum of knowledge from the further contributions teachers would like to make. This could either be done after the syllabus changes being studied or, preferably, as a result of the more extensive research being conducted by groups of teachers and inspectors, intended to establish for each class a check-list of knowledge, listed in order of importance.

In History and Geography, however, we are witnessing a gradual move away from written text in favour of illustration. The text, in certain, extreme cases, has been reduced to nothing more than a link between the illustrative documents. Such texts lack substance and fail to provide the continuous narrative expressed in a precise, elegant language, typical of some older textbooks, which were not just training tools but also cultural works in which pupils (and indeed their families) could find material to enrich them.

Being avid consumers of cinema, television, cartoons and comics, school children would undoubtedly be completely put off by textbooks lacking numerous quality illustrations. But, as a result of the huge number of illustrations and documents, publishers who are neither willing nor able to produce over-bulky volumes are already printing reproductions which are too small to be of use as material for any genuine analysis. At best, some illustrations provide nothing more than decoration or show.

The Head of the General Inspectorate for History and Geography wonders whether or not it is time to revolutionise textbooks. On the one hand, longer, denser texts, provided that the typography is used to reflect the essential knowledge required for secondary education and, on the other hand, a set of documents no longer presented in book form but making use of various audio-visual aids, even video-discs, which would provide a single complete textbook back-up.

To conclude, the school textbook is far from easy to produce and develop, because it must often meet the needs of conflicting vested interests:

- the publisher, anxious for an immediate profit, by reaching a large readership while incurring the lowest possible costs;

- teachers in search of a teaching aid which meets their real needs;

- pupils and their parents who want a low-cost product, easy to handle and interesting at the same time;

- those responsible for national education who must identify the country's cultural and scientific needs and try to meet them, in the medium if not in the long term, when setting a school syllabus.

Huguette BERGERON